

Industry Insight, extended

Francesco Brunessci, journalist, extended interview.

Francesco's interview appears in abridged form in Chapter 1, page 36.

How did you become involved in shows?

When I started working for the fashion industry I was about 35. I had a background as a communicator, a journalist as Editor-in-Chief. My perception of that world was different because I was called to put my experience inside precise things such as communication first, advertising, catwalks, press releases and encounters with the press. It was the beginning of the 2000s in Milan.

So, it was fantastic because each of us wasn't just dedicated to fashion; each of us was co-mingling ... and so I worked for this holding and I was the communications manager and I wanted to put my energies and experience into something that was new.

Tell me about some of the most interesting catwalk shows that you were involved in

I remember some very interesting catwalks like the last Romeo Gigli in the Pershing Hall in Paris. Then we had the brand called Exte that was again a combination of many different talents all dedicated to inventing new forms. For me the most interesting was something that we called the vertical catwalk. It was in 2005 and it was interesting because each time we had to find first the location.

With Romeo [Gigli] (with the location) we talked for hours about the concept and vision of the show. Sometimes it was very easy and sometimes completely the opposite because you have to understand what a catwalk meant. Not just for us but for the press and the public. My position was strange: I was journalist, but I was also working inside the brand. I knew what my colleagues wanted to see. I knew that it was also a danger because we had to promote the brand. The Pershing Hall experience was about how to create, in a hotel in the centre of Paris, a Romeo Gigli world, which was at the time very poetic. I knew that what we had to do was something like a manifesto.

You make a statement with a show. We decided to do something very simple. It was a T-shaped catwalk with all of the chairs around; each chair with a beige cover. On each chair, just a tulip. All of the most important journalists such as Suzy Menkes had a clear view. Romeo said "I don't know whether this will be my last fashion show" so there was huge pressure. The press couldn't know until contracts had been signed. There were secrets and artistic needs. That collection was for fall/winter 2005, it was very moving: of course, beautiful fabrics, silk, the typical genius colours, the red, the brown, the pinks – the fantastic pinks.

Romeo's idea was to make all the models dance, but it was impossible to have dancers. We had to find the faces Romeo wanted: classic faces like Reubens, very classical with light make-up just on the eyes, chignons. The gowns and the skirts that were as usual ... playing with the fabric and with knots and twisting. At the end we held a casting to find the faces

and then we chose all the models that had a background as dancers. We had a choreographer and a fashion director and I had to supervise the whole big circus. We used a dance choreographer called Bruce Collinage. The emotion was huge.

The last choice was not to use lights. It was difficult. We used natural light with just some points where the models were in the sweet spot. The result was extraordinary because it was very simple and it was like writing a poem with simple words. As always the show finished with a wedding gown and that was also extraordinary. It was tulle and lots of knots so that it was like a bedsheet.

What did you do during the show? Were you backstage or front of house?

My position was to stay with the designers but my job was to be both inside and outside because I also had to watch the reactions. I watched people's faces during the show and there was huge emotion because of the elegance and beauty. Twenty beautiful models were dancing with beautiful garments on so it wasn't a catwalk and it wasn't a dance and it wasn't a typical fashion show. Very often my job during those years was about having a different perspective, a different angle.

When we worked with Cavalli – the second line – and because I was a journalist (communications manager) connected to the cinema, to movie stars, I had to do work more like a PR manager. Roberto wanted Alicia Keys but she didn't want to go on the catwalk. She came from Paris and she was just the star of that moment. So in that case it was the opposite to Gigli where the performance was everything and the perfection of elegance.

In Cavalli's catwalk the most important thing was how to underline that one of the biggest celebrities in the world was with us. I remember the calls we had because Alicia Keys was supposed to arrive at the fashion show in a helicopter ... so security problems ... discussions with the police in Milan ... she was stamping her name on the brand and the brand managers wanted this. There was a deep relationship between her name and the pop music and Cavalli, who before that was not celebrity focussed. It is difficult to remember the garments that were shown because a fashion show can be like a moment that becomes eternal but can also be a moment of extraordinary communication. My job was to make this happen.

We worked with Isabella Rosselini for another brand, it was an advert. I had to work with agents and lawyers and the photographer Robert Edman and the stylists. We had to decide ... why this photographer, and it was because he was the stars' photographer. It was a huge amount of research first and then at the end to organise the shoot.

But I have to say that maybe the most exciting time was in June 2005 with a new designer for the menswear spring/summer because what should we do? ... my creativity is telling me to design a collection based on films. At the beginning I helped the designer to focus on the cinema history and then his work was inspired by films. Fashion and film have always been closely related. As a communication manager what is the news? So, little by little as it was with Romeo, first we chose the location, it was a beautiful hanger where now the Armani headquarters is in Milan. At that time, it was an industrial area full of factories,

sometimes used, sometimes abandoned. It was at the centre of the city but unused. We renewed the space, I was enormous, it was white and the height was more than 12 metres.

We built in the space something like Miami, with palm trees, swimming pool, sand, but intentionally fake, all of the colours were other worldly, flashy. Little by little we knew that this was not enough. We had the collection, based on films and we had a fantastic set, but what was the news? One night, we met someone who was a set designer and he said ... in 15 days we will start a new film and ... the beginning of an idea. So we called the director, Carmin Aroso, and we said you have to start with the film in Rome. Why don't you start the film during the fashion show? And so because the leading actor was Caracazelli, we got all the press for the show. A fashion show that wasn't pure fashion show ... it was a magic moment. Fashion was talking with cinema and cinema was talking with fashion. Technically it was very difficult because we had to do lots of rehearsals and of course it was also a problem of money because you have to pay the models for more hours and maybe the same model was modelling for Armani or Cavalli but it was a fantastic success.

The problem was always to find a new location because either public or press want something different all the time; you have to be a very established brand to always do the same. So I remember when I started in 1999, Krizia, she was always showing in the same black space like a Japanese theatre but she was a big name. So we decided to do it 'en plein air' so we had to research the weather. Then we found a French company of acrobats that were doing strange things and so I went to Paris and we had to build this huge ladder in the centre of the gardens and we had all the models who were in fact acrobats. So, I think we had three or four pieces of black plastic in front of the big ladder and there were the acrobats and pop music and they were modelling up and down.

So of course if you are asking me the biggest emotion, it was to work with Romeo: Romeo was a writer and an artist ... it was literature ... it was to put things together ... it was telling a story ... his appreciation of beauty. I can't say he was an easy man but ... who cares, because I always remember the hours and hours of rehearsals for the shows to make it as good as it could be.

The fashion show is very important for the trade and it is important like a love meeting because it happens just in that moment, on that day with those people and it is impossible to repeat it. Theatrical performance, opera, dance, will happen over and over again, but catwalk happens just once.

All of the most important buyers and journalists makes the fashion show, absolutely ... for this reason, it is true that nowadays the only field that resembles the Renaissance is fashion because we have money because the party can be a feast. Because the use we have of bodies is physical, because if Wintour or Rotfield don't arrive, they don't arrive, so you can't invent. So it is a multi-level moment that lasts for a few minutes. But you can't repeat it, so if it is a disaster, it will be a disaster for ever. But if it is one of those moments that changes fashion, it is changed forever. Or the other way round, it is a moment that changes your working life forever.

Catering: I remember hours spent finding a decorator in Milan able to fold pieces of paper and written by hand. It is a huge amount of different craftsmen. And I think that for this reason, at the end you run on adrenalin for hours and weeks. A beautiful man or woman on a stage a few meters from you, the power of the music, the light, the power of being a part of that moment, this is absolutely why people like working in this world – and it is impossible to find a taxi!! I think it was Elbaz who said we have to begin to accept that in this world it is also important to love and to be loved, because in fact of course, a garment is there to be sold, sure, we all know that, but because we are working on the way we are presenting it ... human feelings are absolutely important. It is not just about commerce.